



## The Invisibility of Whiteness

A white boy who is very close with one of the authors of this text has been raised in a predominantly white, small town in the Midwest. On a family trip to the big city in 2008, the boy, then eight years old, enjoyed playing in an interactive water room at a children's museum. Always a gregarious and friendly child, the white adults who accompanied the boy—including one of the authors of this text—enjoyed watching him play with other children as he enjoyed the activities of the museum. Upon exiting the exhibit, in a crowded hallway filled with a racially diverse collection of individuals, the white boy announced proudly and loudly, "I just made an African American friend!"

The white adults accompanying the white boy were surprised by the boy's exclamation and by their own reactions to it. They wondered why the boy had been so cognizant of the race of his new playmate, questioning what his understanding of race—his own and that of others—might be. They considered where the boy had picked up the term he chose to describe the race of the playmate, pondering how race might be addressed in the boy's school or in media he viewed. They wondered how often they themselves addressed race with the boy and how they might have shaped—or failed to shape—his understanding of race. They were also disquieted by their own sense of embarrassment at the loud announcement by this white boy, especially because the bystanders who were likely to have overheard included many individuals of color. How might the bystanders interpret the boy's words? How did the announcement reflect on the boy and his adult companions? How might

the new friend have felt if he had overheard himself being referred to as an “African American friend”?

The boy regularly makes friends whenever the opportunity is available, but he had never before announced that he “just made a white friend.” He clearly noticed and categorized this playmate based on race. We will explore what incidents like this reveal about whiteness and about the visibility of race.

### How Do We Come to Know Things?

In thinking about race, it is interesting to ask, *how* have we come to know what we know about race? Indeed, how have we come to know *anything* about anything? What does it mean to “know” something? How can we be sure that what we “know” really is true? People in different cultures and times sometimes understand the world in very different ways. Who is wrong and who is right?

People also learn about the world in different ways. Diverse cultures have different authorities that they trust and different processes to access knowledge. Are they all valid?

As an example, we might consider feudal times in Europe. Most people in feudal Europe were very poor (extremely poor by middle-class standards in the United States today). Most people lived as farmers. They farmed land that belonged to someone else, to the aristocracy, the kings, queens, lords, and other nobility that ruled over the various geographic areas of Europe. The Catholic Church existed in close connection with and strongly supportive of the aristocracy. In exchange for being allowed to use the land, peasants paid a tithe (or rent) in the food that they produced to the aristocracy. Historians Stuart Ewen and Elizabeth Ewen note, “There was a vast chasm between the material abundance of the Church and aristocracy and the scarcity experienced by the peasantry, and this system was represented as the immutable order of things.”<sup>1</sup>

How did the aristocracy come to own all of that land? Well, today we know that they *took it*, by force. Yet in feudal times, most people believed that the aristocracy owned everything and ruled over everyone because God wanted it that way. People thought that “social inequality was the way of God.”<sup>2</sup> They believed God had chosen the aristocracy and that the aristocracy was a distinct group of humans, almost a species. In this thinking, called the “Great Chain of Being,” the peasants were also like a distinct species. People accepted as “truth” that humans were born into the group where they belonged according to God’s will. Sharply distinct from the pull-yourself-

up-by-your-bootstraps and change-your-lot-in-life thinking common in the United States today, people’s thinking in feudal times held that one should not, indeed one *could not*, change one’s position in life. One was born a peasant much like a cow was born a cow. As far as we know, cows do not dream of being horses someday; and in feudal times, peasants did not dream of being kings and queens.

So how did people in feudal times come to “know” all of these “truths”—that the poor were meant to be poor and the aristocracy was in control because God wanted it that way? How did people come to “know” that this was God’s will? Who expressed God’s will in feudal times?

As you might guess, the aristocracy and the feudal Catholic Church (supported by the aristocracy) dictated God’s will, claiming that God had appointed them to voice His wishes. (During this time period in Europe, the Catholic Church understood God to be decidedly male.) Who benefited from these dictates? The aristocracy and the Church. Ewen and Ewen write about this political and economic system:

The Bible was the Word of God, the universal law, but its interpretation was kept in the hands of the privileged few who were sanctioned to read it. Biblical interpretation tended to uphold the immense social and political landholding power of the nobility and the Church. . . . Although feudal power was often held and defended by the sword, it was justified by the Word. The monopoly over the Word, over literacy, and over the ability to interpret what was read, was a fundamental aspect of rule.<sup>3</sup>

So in terms of the issue of knowledge and how we come to “know” something, we can see from the example of feudalism that different cultures believe in different authorities. Feudal society believed in the authority of God expressed through the aristocracy and the Church. Today, in many places in the world, including Europe, the United States, and most western<sup>4</sup> industrialized nations, we tend to turn to science for knowledge, instead of religion. Instead of the aristocracy and the Church translating God’s wishes for us, scientists using the scientific method work to gain what we understand to be truths about our world and ourselves.

It is interesting to note that, in the above example, someone benefited from the “knowledge,” the “truth” that everyone believed in. The way of thinking in feudal Europe worked to reinforce the economic and social power of the aristocracy and the Church. Social psychologists Don Operario and Susan T. Fiske define *power* as “the disproportionate ability of some individuals or groups to control other people’s outcomes.”<sup>5</sup> *Economic power* entails

control over resources such as land or water, or even symbolic resources (like money today). In this book, we use the term *social power* to mean economic power as well as the amorphous capacity of dominant groups—groups who control economic resources—to control cultural production; in other words, to establish their cultures and norms as the dominant ones. In this book, because the term *social power* comes up repeatedly, we use the terms *social power* and *power* interchangeably.

In reading our book, we ask that you keep the story of inequality in feudal Europe in mind. *Ideologies* like the Great Chain of Being—ways of thinking and commonly held beliefs—in feudal Europe benefited some over others. How might our ways of thinking about race in the contemporary United States, and in our history, also benefit some over others?

In this book, we argue that critically examining the common ways of thinking in the United States teaches us more about social power than about “objective facts.” (In chapter 2, we question race as an objective fact and challenge you to consider the potential bias in science.)

### (In)Visibility of Whiteness

The authors of this text challenge you to consider why the white eight-year-old boy announced that he had made an “African American friend” when the boy had never announced the race of a white friend. Legal scholar Barbara J. Flagg argues that white people are often not conscious of being white.<sup>6</sup> Often whites simply perceive themselves as “normal” or “just human” and fail to notice their own race.<sup>7</sup> While whiteness may be invisible to whites, whites tend to be aware of the races of people of color.<sup>8</sup>

In this text, we seek to challenge readers to consider what it means for a white person to perceive of himself or herself as “normal” while seeing others as having a race. We challenge you to consider the extent to which whiteness is invisible and the implications of this. We invite you to critically examine what it means to perceive oneself as normal. In the social sciences, a *norm* is a social expectation<sup>9</sup>—a description of how one is expected to act or what one is expected to believe within a given social setting.<sup>10</sup> Scholars who study the experience of being white in the United States and the concept of whiteness regularly note that whiteness is often perceived by whites, who as a group hold more social and economic power than people of color, as *normative*—ordinary, typical, what is expected. To be normative is not the same thing as being “right” or “correct.” Normative aspects of a society typically reflect the culture and values of the groups in power.

An Indian American woman well known to the authors of this text shared a story that revealed normative assumptions of her white friends.<sup>11</sup> The woman’s romantic partner, a white man, delights in eating pickled lime, a common relish in Indian food. The woman has teased her partner about his love of pickle because he eats it with an unusual array of foods. While people in India would commonly eat a little bit of pickle as an accompaniment with some foods, her partner has paired larger than normal servings of pickle with breakfast, lunch, dinner, and snack foods. When this couple was having dinner with another couple, the Indian woman playfully teased her partner about his use of pickle. The white man from the other couple joined the friendly teasing, making an analogy that eating pickle with so many foods was like putting catsup on almost everything. The white woman from the other couple then asked, “How do you use normal pickles in India?” By “normal pickles” the white woman was suggesting that pickled cucumbers are “normal” and that pickled limes are not. In India, “normal pickles” are pickled limes. The comment revealed the white woman’s expectation that what is common in the United States is normal; here she reflected normative white U.S. culture.

To perceive whiteness as normative is to see being white as normal.<sup>12</sup> If whiteness is normal, what does that communicate about the experience of other races? Sociologist Ron Nerio, the son of a Mexican American father, details a story that reveals the normativity of whiteness. A white woman who was a friend of Nerio’s family once tried to compliment Nerio’s father by telling him that she did not perceive him as Mexican, but rather saw him as a Spaniard. For this friend, the concept of Mexican was embroiled with racial and class stereotypes that she did not think applied to her friend, whom she saw as being like a European, like a white person. When Nerio’s father rejected her identification of him as like a white man, she assumed he was being humble and continued to insist that he really “seemed white.” She thought she was complimenting him and never realized how deeply she had offended him.<sup>13</sup> We invite readers to explore why a white woman would consider “seeming European” to be a compliment for a Mexican American man. What did she reveal about her beliefs about whiteness and about being Mexican? We encourage you to think about why the white woman did not realize that her “compliment” was actually offensive. We argue that her obtuse reaction revealed a lack of critical thinking about whiteness.

Social scientific research suggests that when a person gets to know another individual, one stops seeing that person as a member of a category—such as seeing a person as Mexican American or as male—and starts to see

the person as an individual.<sup>14</sup> The white family friend seemed to conflate seeing Nerio's father as an individual with seeing him as white. Rather than basing a compliment on his individual character, she attempted to compliment him based on being similar to her concept of whiteness. This suggests that the woman perceived whiteness as normal, as normative and as *better*, and preferable to being of color.

Historically within the United States those who are considered white rarely have been challenged to think about their own race. College campuses today are places where whites are more likely to be asked to think critically about whiteness. Sociologist Charles A. Gallagher notes that being prompted by college courses to think about whiteness can be disconcerting for whites because whiteness is so often invisible.<sup>15</sup> Throughout this book, we challenge readers to think critically about race, especially whiteness. Making whiteness visible is a critical step in thinking critically about race and addressing systematic inequality in the United States.

This text will reveal that whiteness is a shifting category that has been created by historical, political, social, and economic events. Within the United States, the first people considered white were Anglo-Saxon Protestants (an ethnic group with ties to England) and individuals from northwestern Europe. In chapter 3, we explore specifically how Irish Catholics were once considered non-white and how they became white. The history of Italians and Ashkenazi Jews also reveal whiteness as a changing category. These groups, similar to the Irish, became white based on historical, political, social, and economic shifts.

### What Is Race?

Before you continue to read, we invite you to consider this question: What is race? How have you understood race? If asked to define race, how would you put the concept into words?

Using evidence from anthropology and biology, we will explain that human physical traits such as skin color and facial features vary on a continuum—slight gradations from one individual to another—rather than differing in distinctly separate groups. As we explore in chapter 2, from a biological standpoint, one cannot definitively group individuals into distinct races that clearly differ from each other.

If race does not exist as biological category, you might be wondering why we have dedicated an entire book to the subject. Although race is not an aspect of our genes, race is critically important in the United States. *Race* exists as a social and political understanding of humans that attempts to

assign individuals into distinct groups in a way that systematically benefits some—whites—while limiting opportunities for others—people of color.

Historian Nell Irvin Painter argues, "Race is an idea, not a fact."<sup>16</sup> Throughout this book, we explore how powerful this idea has been in shaping human lives. Following influential physical anthropologists such as George J. Armelagos and Alan H. Goodman, we argue that while race is not a biological category, the important social implications of race and of racism make this socially constructed concept a vital issue for careful study.<sup>17</sup> Operario and Fiske argue, "Racial categories exist because people and societies believe them to be true; they derive from psychological and societal processes, rather than from biological or evolutionary processes."<sup>18</sup>

Sociologist Eduardo Bonilla-Silva has distinguished race from ethnicity. As we will see in chapter 2, race has traditionally been a category assigned to a group in a way that justifies the subordination of groups of color by the group in power. Alternatively, *ethnicity* is a social and cultural category.<sup>19</sup> Ethnicity tends to be viewed as a subgroup of race; all members of a given ethnicity will be viewed as belonging to the same race. As sociologists Michael Omi and Howard Winant identify, social and cultural aspects of ethnicity encompass "such diverse factors as religion, language, 'customs,' nationality, and political identification."<sup>20</sup> We will explore ethnicities that have been included in whiteness, have moved into whiteness, and have been excluded from whiteness.

### The Modern World System

One of the authors of this text, Jean Halley, grew up in rural Wyoming in the 1970s believing that there was something biologically distinct about different racial groups. This was why, it was commonly "known," Black and white people should not intermarry. In her childhood, this was a basic, accepted "truth" that people around Halley believed much like they believed women were naturally better, more loving parents than men; men were naturally more rational than women; and the "Reds," as one of her social science teachers called people living in communist nations, were going to march on the United States at any moment.

Where did this idea about race come from? Why did people believe that different racial groups are actually biologically different from one another? Was this thinking merely because the different groups do seem to look different, at least somewhat different, some of the time?

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For a moment let us move back in time to the period when feudalism slowly came undone and a new system began to replace it. This new system, the “Modern World System,” came into being in the mid-fifteenth century as people from different geographic locations increasingly began to encounter one another. Africa, Asia, and the Americas had been “discovered” by Europeans.<sup>21</sup> These “new” worlds held new (to Europeans) resources as well as human beings who looked and behaved in strikingly different ways.

Imagine being one of the first of your racial group to see another racial group. How might you have made sense of the visual differences you witnessed? How might you have explained cultures seemingly completely distinct from your own?

In Europe at this time, the beginnings of a system that we live with today called *capitalism* began taking hold with a new class of people, the merchant class, who traded in increasingly available luxury goods supplied by the new lands, including “gold, silver, precious gems, silk, sugar, coffee, tea, spices, and tobacco.”<sup>22</sup> As trade grew, “the merchant class, whose wealth was built on such exchanges, followed the social lead of aristocrats and emerged as a prime consumer of luxury items.”<sup>23</sup> In Europe, being a peasant, a priest, or a king were no longer the only options. Slowly, the various parts of the world became interconnected as never before. The story of race is inextricably bound with this newly interconnected world.

In this interconnection, Europe began to develop as a powerful region by making use of the labor and resources of other places. Not all global locations and peoples fared as well as Europe in the Modern World System. Indeed, as sociologist Immanuel Wallerstein notes, the development of this new and global community was deeply and fundamentally unequal. Today, springing from this history, we continue to live in a deeply unequal global system. While some places gained great power and wealth in the Modern World System, others lost power over their land, labor, and other resources. Through brutally imposed structures of slavery and forced labor, some even lost claim to their own persons. Indeed, the development of Western Europe depended on the oppression, labor, and resources of peoples in Africa, Asia, and the Americas. As Ewen and Ewen make clear,

For West Europe to triumph as a global center of commerce and industry, it was necessary for other regions of the world to be maintained in a subservient position, their economies stunted to serve the needs of others. Even within Europe, for certain sectors to emerge as masters of the universe, it was necessary that others live in varying states of immiseration. For “progress” to come into being, it was also seen as necessary for certain indigenous populations to

be subjugated or extinguished. Others were systematically dislocated, enlisted into slavery, governed by the lash.<sup>24</sup>

Much like in feudal times in Europe, people worked to explain this inequality. Yet now, Europeans had a new “religion” from which they claimed to study, understand, and know the world; that is, science.

### A Brief Introduction to Cultural Materialism

This text offers a criticism of science and challenges readers to consider other perspectives as well. *Cultural materialism* is a way of thinking about the world often used by both anthropologists and sociologists.<sup>25</sup> Cultural materialists believe that the ways we think about things—and what we “know” about the world—spring from the ways we produce our lives.<sup>26</sup> What does it mean to produce our lives? Well, it can happen in a variety of ways. We humans need food and shelter and to reproduce, bringing new humans into the world as the older ones die. We can get and do these things in many different ways. Some people in some time periods have lived, and many still do live, by farming. Others live by fishing for their food. Some people build temporary shelters because they live nomadic lives, moving from place to place as seasons change or as the animals they herd need new land to graze. Others build permanent structures that last for hundreds of years. Cultural materialists believe that the way a given people *lives* births, so to speak, the ways that people *think* about the world and themselves. The culture, knowledge, and beliefs these people develop and refer to spring from their ways of producing and reproducing, their ways of surviving, in life.

We have already seen an example of cultural materialism in our brief exploration of feudalism. In feudal times, peasants farmed to make their living, and they gave a portion of their produce to the aristocracy in exchange for being allowed to live on the land. As best we can tell, most people did not explain this as we might today; that is, that a brutal and violent ruling class suppressed the poor majority. Instead, people understood that situation as one desired by God. People believed in the “Great Chain of Being,” where the powerful ruled because God wanted it this way.

Cultural materialism helps us to understand our own, more recent history in terms of race. In the United States, our historical thinking about race springs from our ways of living—during slavery and during other important periods in the United States, such as reconstruction after the Civil War, the early twentieth century when enormous numbers of people immigrated from eastern and southern Europe, Jim Crow<sup>27</sup> and legalized segregation, and the

civil rights movement. How might our contemporary thinking about race in the United States and Europe spring from the ways we build our lives and survive—our material reality—today?

### Whiteness and White Privilege

In chapter 3 we investigate the social construction of whiteness. The very concept of whiteness was developed to include people from different ethnic backgrounds in a common category that excluded other ethnicities. As we will see in our exploration of Irish Catholics becoming white in chapter 3, ethnic groups who were accepted into whiteness were granted higher status and privileges. As we examine in chapter 8, U.S. law such as the Immigration Act of 1924 systematically privileged whites. This immigration law specified that only white immigrants were eligible to apply for citizenship. Before the concept of white as a race was created, certain ethnic groups held greater social power than others—the most powerful of these ethnic groups were the first to be perceived as white when the concept of white as a race developed. Teutonic peoples (descendants of Germanic tribes), especially the Anglo-Saxons (composed of two Teutonic tribes who invaded Britain during the Roman Empire and became the English), were the first to be categorized as white. As we explore in chapter 3, working-class and impoverished peoples of European descent joined Anglo-Saxons with strong economic resources and social power. Across socioeconomic class, a common identity as white emerged, creating a powerful *ingroup*—a shared identity with a feeling of belongingness to the group and connection to other members of the group.<sup>28</sup> The concept of whiteness helped to solidify the social power of the economic elite by encouraging poor and working-class people who became white to see themselves as part of an *ingroup* with the elite, a group that excluded and subordinated people of color.<sup>29</sup>

Education scholar Zeus Leonardo identified that the concept of whiteness “depends on the racial other for its own identity.”<sup>30</sup> Whiteness only exists as an *ingroup* because it is contrasted with *outgroups*—groups with which members of the *ingroup* do not identify, do not feel a sense of connection, and might classify as “the other.”<sup>31</sup>

Often when one thinks in terms of “us” compared to “them,” one engages in *binary* thinking—perceiving a matter as having two opposing sides. Whiteness is often perceived in contrast to groups of color, as though people come in one of two distinct forms—white or of color. Whiteness is one side of a false binary. In other words, today in the mainstream United States, we tend to think about white people in contrast to the other position on this

false binary, people of color. Our book focuses on this binary way of *thinking* about race because it is so powerful in our society, *not* because it is real in any biological sense.

*Dualism* is another term for a binary—suggesting there are two distinct, and only two, positions on an issue. Historically and today in the United States, being white is juxtaposed with being *not* white. This juxtaposition means that whiteness, as a frame for understanding human beings, dictates and necessitates a dualism, a *false* dualism. As we explain in chapter 2, careful analysis of race reveals that humans cannot be clearly separated into whites or any other distinct group based on race. Human genetic diversity varies on a continuum, not as a binary. Further, while we will use “people of color” throughout this book to reveal the false dualism often used to think about race, we encourage you to think critically about the great diversity among individuals classified as “of color.”

We, the authors of this text, do not support the false dualism of race. Indeed, we mean to challenge it as a way of thinking that is both wrongheaded and deeply damaging. However, to some extent in our challenge, we will seek to reveal the binary framework by contrasting whites with people of color because that is the racial framework we live with in the mainstream United States today.

Through critical analysis of the false dualism and insight into whiteness as it relates to social power, scholars such as Peggy McIntosh, who was inspired by her work in feminist studies, have identified ways that whites are systematically privileged over people of color. McIntosh notes that some of these white privileges—such as not having to fear that one’s race may contribute to one being stopped and frisked by police—are advantages that would be ideal to share across all people. We challenge you to consider how social action might widen the number of people who can share such privileges. Other white privileges—such as assuming that whites are more deserving of admission to colleges and universities than students of color—are unfair and biased against people of color. We further explore college admission as it relates to white privilege in chapter 8.<sup>32</sup>

White antiracist activist Tim Wise argues that being white in the United States means “defining ourselves by a negative, providing ourselves with an identity that [is] rooted in the external—rooted in the relative oppression of others. . . . Inequality and privilege [are] the only real components of whiteness. . . . Without racial privilege there is no whiteness, and without whiteness, there is no racial privilege. Being white only means to be advantaged.”<sup>33</sup> Revealing white privilege challenges the *myth of meritocracy*, the belief that people who work hard in the United States will succeed and that success is

the result of hard work.<sup>34</sup> Critically examining white privilege exposes unfair advantages that make success easier for whites while disadvantaging people of color.<sup>35</sup> Chapter 7 explores the myth of meritocracy.

## Racism

A common misconception equates racism with individual acts of intentional bigotry.<sup>36</sup> As we further discuss in chapter 5, racism can be perpetuated by white individuals who fail to realize that they are acting in racially biased ways. Moreover, as we discuss throughout the text, institutional racism is often propagated by social systems such as the criminal courts (see chapters 4 and 7) and immigration law (see chapter 8). Institutional, or systemic, racism consists of policies and practices that systematically favor powerful racial groups—usually whites in the United States—while discriminating against others—groups of color.<sup>37</sup> For example, in chapter 6 we further explore institutional racism in public schools, including unequal funding for education in different neighborhoods and biased expectations that may influence which students are tested for gifted and talented programs.

Sociologists Joe R. Feagin, Hernán Vera, and Pinar Batur note, “Being white in this society almost by definition means rarely having to think about it. Whites must make a special effort to become deeply aware of their own and others’ racism.”<sup>38</sup> Critical examinations of racism often lead people to move from perceiving racism as a matter of intentional, individual acts to seeing racism in the United States as including subtle and potentially unintentional behaviors by individuals as well as systemic issues.<sup>39</sup> Well-meaning white people may inadvertently support racism by failing to challenge a racist system.<sup>40</sup>

Psychologist Raphael S. Ezekiel argues that it is essential for all whites in America to examine race and racism:

If you visited South Africa and spoke with older White South Africans, you would expect to find their minds affected by having grown up in a society that was intensely racist. White Americans grow up in a society in which race has been and is profoundly important.

... If I am White and grow up in a society in which race matters, I inhale racism, and racism becomes part of my mind and spirit. ... There will always be layers of myself that harbor racist thoughts and racist attitudes. This is not to say that those must remain the dominant parts of my mind and spirit. It is to say that it is mistaken to presume that I have no traces of racism in me.

The task is to get acquainted with those layers of oneself—to learn to recognize them and not be frightened by them. It is not a disgrace to have absorbed some racism. It is a disgrace not to know it and to let those parts of ourselves go unchecked.<sup>41</sup>

To better understand racism, one must critically examine the relationships of race, especially whiteness, with social, economic, and political power.<sup>42</sup> *Prejudice* is a matter of favoring one’s ingroup over outgroups,<sup>43</sup> of disliking groups or individuals based on group membership.<sup>44</sup> Social theorist Oliver Cromwell Cox identified that not all forms of racial prejudice carry the same potential to “subjugate a people”; the racial prejudice of whites is potentially more damaging because of social and political power.<sup>45</sup> In 1970, Patricia Bidol, then school superintendent in Baldwin, Michigan, worked to raise awareness of the special role of whiteness in racism. Because whites hold important power in the United States, she argued that only whites can be racist.<sup>46</sup> Consistent with Cox and Bidol, clinical psychologist Beverly Daniel Tatum argues that racial bigotry is open to everyone but that the term *racism* should be reserved for “prejudice plus power.” Because of the disproportionate power held by whites in the United States, we follow Tatum in arguing that anyone can be a racial bigot but that only whites can be racist.<sup>47</sup>

We consider it important for readers to understand how we conceptualize racism—as systemic as well as individual, sometimes unintentional, racial prejudice coupled with power. Like Tatum, we invite readers to develop their own understanding of racism based on critical reflection.

While it may be an interesting intellectual exercise to think of specific situations in which whites are less likely to have power than people of color, we challenge you to consider how frequently whites have greater power than people of color. Journalist Robert Jensen expresses a concern that individuals who focus on the few situations in which whites have less power than people of color may be trying to end a critical discussion of race before the discussion can truly happen.<sup>48</sup>

Similarly, when white racism is raised, some individuals try to change the subject to focus on how certain groups of color are prejudiced against other groups of color. Such discussions have their place, but we encourage you to have them only if you truly want to understand the social problems involved, not if you are simply trying to avoid focusing on whiteness and white privilege.

We invite you to consider how having an African American president of the United States may influence understandings of race and racism. We are heartened that many more opportunities are open to people of color today than historically, but we continue to see strong evidence that whites remain much more powerful as a group than any other.

In an occasional misconception of racism we have observed in our teaching, some students have confused having a critical discussion regarding race with being racist. While we invite disagreement about how to define racism, this particular misunderstanding of the concept perplexes us. We have wondered whether strong discomfort regarding the discussion of race could lead some individuals to have avoided thinking critically about race or racism, so much so that they have equated discussions of race with racism.

### Perspectives

We three authors of this text have been trained in distinctly different disciplines within the social sciences—sociology, psychology, and economics. Throughout this text, we draw on the theories and evidence within our respective fields while also critiquing these fields. We use theories and evidence from biology, history, and anthropology. (We assume readers have a working knowledge of biology and history but may be less familiar with anthropology, a social science that examines the impact of culture, biology, and evolution on human groups.<sup>49</sup> Anthropology has been an important field in challenging racist ideologies.)

Drawing on her expertise in sociology, Jean Halley infuses this text with a critical examination of social history and cultural studies. As famously noted by C. Wright Mills, *sociology* is the study of both social institutions and of the embeddedness of individual lives in such institutions. Mills called on sociologists to explore the connections between seemingly “private troubles” and “public issues.”<sup>50</sup> Race is clearly a matter of both. In studying race, sociologists commonly use theories to be discussed at length in this book, such as that of cultural materialism (defined above) and the social construction of race (to be discussed in chapter 3).

Amy Eshleman contributes her empirical approach to *psychology*, “the scientific study of behavior and mental processes.”<sup>51</sup> As a social psychologist, Eshleman focuses on how individuals are influenced by their perceptions of social expectations. Social psychologists seek to understand racism by carefully examining factors that seem to reduce or exacerbate this social problem. We explore the empirical method in chapter 2 and applications of social psychological work in educational settings in chapters 6 and 9.

Ramya Vijaya brings an expertise on economics to this text. Through economic analysis, we explore the vast inequalities related to race and caused by racism. Chapters 5 through 8 provide critical economic concepts and evidence that serve as a foundation for our argument.

When Eshleman communicated to a recent college graduate that she was writing a textbook, she was dismayed when this strong alumna admitted that she had never considered that real people write textbooks. Although the student had read many textbooks throughout her undergraduate career, she treated textbooks as truth rather than as a perspective created by humans. While we authors have been careful to present information as clearly and accurately as possible, we acknowledge that our work—like that of all thinkers—will be influenced by our cultural understandings and ideologies. Political scientist Michael Freeden defines *ideology* as “thought-patterns of individuals and groups in a society which relate to the way they comprehend and shape their political worlds.”<sup>52</sup>

Ideologies tend to be taken-for-granted beliefs that both come from and work to reinforce systems of social power. Because they are social, rather than individual, we share ideological ways of thinking with others in our culture, and we usually assume these ways of thinking to be correct without questioning them. In other words, we are born into our ideological frameworks as we are born into communities. We tend to take on the ideological frameworks of our communities, like the air we breathe, without questioning or even thinking consciously about it.

Ideologies play an important role in the production and reproduction of social power. These are ways of thinking that justify social realities; we do not merely take for granted the thinking, we take for granted the system it supports. The now-known-to-be-false belief that race is a biological reality has been at the core of our shared ideologies of race. Much like the ideological framework of the Great Chain of Being underlying feudalism, race as biology is a way of thinking that is more than incorrect. This way of thinking supports and reproduces social power, the power of white people over people of color.

Ideology influences all academic endeavors. Throughout the textbook, we authors refer to our perspective and to how our personal experiences have helped us to see whiteness. We invite you to critically reflect as you read and to formulate any disagreements you have. As you will see in chapter 2, research is advanced by scholars challenging each other’s ideas and evidence.

Like all authors of textbooks (or writing of any form), we present a particular perspective and have selected specific issues on which to focus. For example, this text briefly explores intersectionality—how important social categories such as race, gender, socioeconomic class, and sexuality intersect and interact with each other in ways that influence human experiences (see chapter 4). We then invest chapter 5 in exploring how race and socioeconomic class intersect. To keep our focus on how sociology, psychology, and



economics can be used to think critically about whiteness, we have chosen not to explore gender and sexuality as deeply as we might have explored these important intersections. We encourage readers to seek further examples of how gender and sexuality interact with race, socioeconomic class, and other important social categories.

Because of our focus on interdisciplinary perspectives on whiteness, we elected not to cover the excellent work of Janet E. Helms on racial identity development.<sup>53</sup> We encourage readers with a particular interest in psychological approaches to studying individual experiences of race to read Helms as well as Beverly Daniel Tatum's review of Helms's theory.<sup>54</sup>

As a genre, textbooks have a tendency to present material as though it is simple, objective fact. We take issue with this tendency. Indeed, we argue there is no way out of opinion in argument. Everyone's arguments, ideas, and claims—including ours in this book—are just that, arguments. We work to offer you the clearest argument possible with strong evidence to back it up as we seek to *problematize* issues of race and racism, particularly whiteness. Our goal is to challenge readers to consider how issues that might have seemed straightforward are actually quite complex when one examines them critically. Given that these issues are complex, we acknowledge that your perspective may differ from ours. We invite you to carefully consider our perspective and to use this material to inform your own perspective. We recognize that some will disagree with us, and we look forward to an ongoing conversation.

### What Is in a Name?

Throughout our writing, we have carefully selected the terms we use to identify racial groups, down to the details of capitalization and hyphenation. Here we highlight just a few of our choices, which are driven by respect for these racial groups and their expressed preferences regarding appropriate terms to identify them. We follow convention in capitalizing names for racial and ethnic groups of color such as Latino, Asian, African American, and Native American. Even if these terms were not routinely capitalized, we would have chosen to capitalize them as a way of offering respect to these groups that have been traditionally underrepresented in positions of power. In this line of thinking, we capitalize "Blacks." While other authors who critically reflect on whiteness may choose to capitalize both "Whites" and "Blacks," our intentional choice not to capitalize "whites" is a conscious decision to distinguish the critical examination of whiteness in this text from how white supremacists may refer to whites.

The terms *African American*, *Black*, and *Black American* are currently preferred terms for a wide range of individuals who have lived in the United States for generations or emigrated from places as diverse as the many countries of Africa and areas of the Caribbean. While we recognize that individuals classified within this group may have strong preferences for one of these labels, we use these terms interchangeably with the goal of esteeming all individuals who may be classified by these terms.

When referring to individuals with cultural or family heritage ties to Puerto Rico, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Mexico, and the countries of Central America and South America, we choose to use *Latina* or *Latino*. The term *Hispanic* was created for the 1970 U.S. Census to classify individuals with ethnic ties to Spanish-speaking cultures. Our preference for *Latina/o* over *Hispanic* is based on the connection of *Hispanic* "to internalized colonization because it is strongly supported by politically conservative groups who regard their European ancestry as superior to the conquered indigenous peoples of the Americas."<sup>55</sup> Further, "Many millions of Spanish-speaking people—such as Native Americans—are not of true Spanish descent, and millions of Latin Americans do not speak Spanish or claim Spanish heritage (e.g., Brazilians), therefore, they are not Hispanics."<sup>56</sup> *Latina/o* is perceived by many, including the authors of this text, as a more inclusive term that does not glorify or require European ancestry. For clarity, we use *Hispanic* only when referring to research and public policy that has used that term to classify individuals.<sup>57</sup>

We caution readers to think critically about the power of words that have been used to derogate racial and ethnic groups. While there are multiple powerful epithets on which we might focus, we briefly explore *nigger* because we believe it can be one of the most powerful words spoken in the United States. Legal scholar Randall Kennedy shares the history and complexity of this slur in *Nigger: The Strange Career of a Troublesome Word*. As a Black man, Kennedy notes that his own relationship with the slur is complicated and nuanced but that it was important to him to communicate clearly to whites that the word is "ugly, evil, irredeemable."<sup>58</sup> Scholars of African American studies have explored the multiple ways the word has been used in the Black community, and influential leaders have disagreed regarding the possible utility of reclaiming the term in certain contexts within the community. While we encourage all readers to learn more about social history and contemporary debates about the power of words, we challenge non-Black readers to focus on the likelihood that use of the word outside the Black community conveys "racial hatred or contempt for all blacks."<sup>59</sup> We acknowledge that some readers from outside the Black community may be confused by the many uses of

this word within the Black community. Like Kennedy, we encourage readers to consider the words of former Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr.: “A word is not a crystal, transparent and unchanged; it is the skin of a living thought and may vary greatly in color and content according to the circumstances and time in which it is used.” We argue that there are no circumstances or times in which whites can use this word in an inoffensive manner. While we encourage all readers to delve into explorations of matters of race, we doubt that individuals who would not be targeted with this slur will ever fully understand it (including the authors of this text). Therefore, we argue that people who are not Black cannot use this powerful word from within a place of understanding or connection to it.

Did you notice our use of “non-Black” in the previous paragraph? If so, did you have any reaction when reading it? Journalist Robert Jensen has chosen to use the term *non-white* because he wants to make whiteness visible in discussions about race.<sup>60</sup> While many scholars prefer the term *people of color*, Jensen argues that what makes a group “of color” is that the group has been excluded from the category of whiteness. Alternatively, one may argue that *people of color* is a more respectful label than to focus on what a group is not. Choosing either option consciously can be a political decision that conveys information about one’s thoughts on race, especially if one notes why that choice has been made. (While *person of color* and *people of color* are commonly used today as respectful terms, these terms are distinct from the outdated use of describing a person as *colored*. While the outdated term was once considered respectful, use of it today to refer to a person or groups of people reveals a lack of sensitivity to language.)

We invite you to pay attention to the terms used to describe racial groups and to consider what information is conveyed by these choices. In quotes used throughout the text, you will see different ways that scholars have presented group names. We also encourage you to note the choices made by media, peers, family members, and others. Consider what terms and form of capitalization you want to use.

Throughout this text (including earlier in this chapter), we note key vocabulary terms from the social sciences in italics. We invite you to reflect on these terms and to try to use them in your discussions and writing about whiteness.

### Discussion Questions

1. Did reading chapter 1 arouse any emotions for you? Common emotions during critical explorations of race include anger, frustration, guilt,

discomfort, and confusion. If you had a strong emotional response to a certain aspect of the chapter, identify the part of the chapter, describe the emotion that was aroused, and evaluate this experience. If you did not have any emotional responses to any material in the chapter, explore that.

2. Describe several issues considered to be “truths” in feudal times and in the 1970s that are now understood to be false. Explore possible “truths” today that you predict will be demonstrated to be false in the future.
3. What are social and economic power? Who held power in feudal Europe, and how did they hold on to that power? Who holds power in the United States today, and how do those in power hold on to that power? What is meant by the terms *norm* and *normative*? What has been a common relationship between whiteness and these terms? How might this relate to power?
4. What does it mean to claim that whiteness tends to be invisible to whites? When have you been aware of whiteness? What might that reveal about whiteness?
5. Describe cultural materialism. How does it relate to race, particularly whiteness? Evaluate Tim Wise’s argument (quoted within the chapter) that inequality and privilege are essential aspects of whiteness.
6. What are ingroups and outgroups? What is the relationship of these terms to inclusion and exclusion? Who is part of the white ingroup? Who is excluded from this group?
7. Have you ever had an experience when you were keenly aware of yourself as privileged? If so, how did this awareness affect you? How did the privilege affect how others treated you? If you have never been aware of privilege, reflect on why that might be.
8. Racism is described in this chapter as ranging from unintentional individual behavior by whites to policies at an institutional level. It is also argued that racism is “prejudice plus power,” such that only whites can be racist. How would you have defined racism before reading this chapter? What are your reactions to the definition of racism in this chapter?
9. What do you think has been the effect of having a president of the United States who is African American? Has this changed understandings of race or racism in the United States? If so, how? If not, why not?
10. What is ideology? How does ideology shape understanding of important issues such as race? Do individuals tend to be conscious of the influence of ideology?